

REPORT TO G.C. 26 JANUARY 2001

MANDELSON

The ground trembled under our feet at Westminster this week as Peter Mandelson exited from front-line politics with very little prospect of returning. Mandelson was an enigma. Someone who was portrayed as the master strategist but who failed utterly to build any platform of support within the PLP or, I suspect, the wider Party. The events leading up to his resignation have been documented thoroughly in the press in recent days but I remain totally mystified as to why he chose to conceal the fact that he had spoken to Home Office Minister Mike O'Brien about the Hinduja case. No one would have turned a hair if he admitted to this - if there had been, at the same time, no suggestion of any fixing or preferment, but simply an enquiry about the procedures for handling a citizenship application. I very much hope that we will move on swiftly on to the core policy issues that we will want to get across during the forthcoming General Election campaign. We have a good story to tell and we have got to get out there and give people the facts.

GENERAL ELECTION

My latest Parliamentary Report has gone out to members and I reminded them of the way the vote had moved in the 1992 and 1997 General Elections. It is as plain as a pikestaff that the Conservative vote will increase because at the last election many Tory inclined voters sat on their hands and didn't go to the polling stations because they couldn't bring themselves to vote for an incompetent Government mired in sleaze. The 1997 turn-out was 7% below 1992 and these were the missing Tory voters. The Conservatives will also get the votes that went to the Referendum Party candidate last time round and we have got to anticipate an increase in the Liberal vote which dropped to a record low last time. Whenever the Lib/Dem vote rises it eats into our share. Finally - and most importantly - there may be a problem getting Labour supporters to vote. As a general rule of thumb, people vote against things, not to reward or to give a pat on the back to a Government that's done a half decent job.

Over the next few weeks there will be a flurry of announcements designed to shore up our support amongst key sections of the electorate. The pensioners will soon be getting their £5 a week and £8 for couples increase, families with children will be getting the new tax credit and we can expect further cash to be taken out of Gordon Brown's war chest as and when necessary. We in Pendle are the beneficiaries of one such announcement! Only last week we were told that Pendle is to get double the amount of cash we expected under the Government's Neighbourhood Renewal Initiative. Instead of £490,000 from 1 April, we will be getting £980,000, to be spent in the most deprived wards and determined by local priorities. Over the next 3 years Pendle will be getting just short of £4 million.

/cont...



A WEEK IN WESTMINSTER

Down at Westminster next week I shall be meeting the Prime Minister in Downing Street for a little chit-chat and the following day I have a meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I shall be pressing him to open up his wallet and give us the cash we need! These meetings will be slotted in to a week which is dominated by the Standing Committee on the Hunting Bill where we are going through the legislation line by line. I have had a lot of letters from people all over the country - mostly in support - but I fear the blood sports lobby is keeping its powder dry for the big Countryside Alliance March & Rally in London on 18 March.

The Countryside Alliance and the people behind it have never been supportive or sympathetic to the aims of the Labour Government (leaving aside the hunting issue completely) and their aim is to destabilise the Government in the run-up to the Election. We must remind people that hunting wild mammals with dogs is (1) cruel; (2) it causes unnecessary suffering and (3) there are more humane ways of controlling the fox, mink and deer populations. The hare population is, in fact, declining and this little creature gets a mention in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (drawn up the previous Conservative Government) which sets a goal of doubling the hare population by 2010.

GETTING THINGS BACK ON THE RAILS

Transport is another important issue which could go badly wrong for the Government. At the moment people are still blaming the Conservatives for all the horrors that we are witnessing on the railways but this situation may not continue for ever and it is important that the Government gets a real handle on this issue. At Westminster I am supporting the "take back the track" campaign which has the objective of bringing back Railtrack into public ownership again. This has more support than the Prime Minister will acknowledge (I believe BBC's On the Record this Sunday will be focusing on this.)

PENDLE

Here at home, I shall be joining the Editor of the Lancashire Evening Telegraph and other East Lancashire MPs at Ewood Park for the game between Blackburn and Barnsley and with an election only weeks away, I could hardly snub the LET! On Friday I shall be going over to Preston for a meeting with the Chair of the County's Education Committee, Hazel Harding.

With the help of George, the Carr Road waiting room is being transformed. We are striving for a soft, relaxing ambience in the hope that it will keep constituents calm! I am still trying to persuade Helen and Ruth to let me put an aquarium in there complete with tropical fish, but so far they have vetoed the project. Support urgently needed!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.1.01.

REPORT TO PENDLE G.C. - NOVEMBER

A huge amount has happened since the October GC. Most of it has been very positive and the Government is returning to an even keel after the buffeting it took over the fuel protest. Today, we have the good news that Labour held on to the three Parliamentary Seats it was defending in Glasgow, West Bromwich and Preston. The turn-out was pretty lamentable but if the Tories can't fire people up to vote against the Government of the day they are going to have a real problem come the General Election. As I said before, we should be planning for an election in May of next year.

PENSION BOOST

Gordon Brown's pre Budget Statement earlier this month gave a clear pointer to a May Election. Pendle's 16,259 pensioners will be getting an increase of £5 per week or £8 for a couple, in April. The less well off pensioner on the minimum income guarantee will get £92.15. This month, pensioner households will be getting a £200 cheque for the Winter Fuel Allowance. There were other headline grabbing announcements with every primary school Head in the country getting a windfall cheque for between £4,000 - £7,000 and secondary Heads getting between £10,000 - £30,000 to pay for outstanding repairs. The Chancellor also announced a freeze on fuel duty until 2002 and a cut in vehicle excise duty for smaller cars under 1500cc, saving £55 per year for 5 million motorists. In a separate move, the Government announced an ex-gratia payment of £10,000 each to all Far East POWs or their widows. This went down very well at the local branches of the Royal British Legion, with the announcement timed to coincide with Remembrance Day.

LORDS vs COMMONS

At Westminster things have been busy. We are now in the spill-over Session, dealing with legislation which has gone to the House of Lords and which will return to the Commons for approval before Royal Assent. Unfortunately, I could not vote with the Government on the privatisation of Air Traffic Control and I was one of 37 Labour MPs (with a similar number abstaining) who argued for a non profit making Trust as the solution that was staring the Government in the face. The Transport Bill is now back in the Lords and will return to us shortly. It is expected the Lords will again throw out the Air Traffic Control section on the grounds that it was not in the Manifesto. The Countryside Bill which brings in the right to roam, returns to the Commons from the Lords next Tuesday and, amazingly, it has not been too badly mangled. This week we passed the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill which is an important cement in the peace process. And we also passed the controversial Immigration Appeals Regulations which I could not support. These Regulations mean it will cost £500 for an oral appeal against the refusal of a visitor's visa - a huge sum for many people living in Pakistan and in developing countries. The initial visa application costs £33.

We also had an election for Chair of the PLP. I voted for Tony Lloyd who lost by six votes against the incumbent, Clive Soley. As usual, there was much arm twisting to deliver the pay-roll vote for Clive.

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QUEEN'S SPEECH

Next week the Freedom of Information Bill returns to the Commons, as does the Political Parties Bill which will bring in new rules for election spending. The Queen's Speech is on 6 December and I am keeping my fingers crossed that there will be a raft of popular measures to take the Party into the General Election. We know there will be a fox-hunting bill setting out 3 options - an outright ban, tighter regulation or the status quo. We can expect a new crime bill with fixed penalties for yobbish behaviour. The Prime Minister got such a pasting for suggesting that drunken yobs should be marched to a hole-in-the wall machine to pay an on the spot fine. It was a fair bet he would insist on something being brought forward.

RURAL AND URBAN WHITE PAPERS

I should also mention that we expect the Rural White Paper on Tuesday next week and this is clearly important for an area like Pendle. I hope it has some positive policies as I am speaking to the local branch of the NFU on 5 December and I would like to escape from the meeting in one piece! We have just seen the publication of the Urban White Paper which is full of good ideas. Although many of the proposals of the Lord Rogers taskforce on urban renaissance have been quietly dropped. We also had an announcement on road maintenance spending in Lancashire - up from £6m to £16m and I am hopeful that we shall see improvement works to North Valley Road in next year's programme.

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I met the Council's Kashmir Working Group earlier this month and had a useful exchange of views, with my Conservative opponent Rasjid Skinner strewing a few banana skins in front of my path in a forlorn effort to trip me up! Yesterday I met the new Pakistan High Commissioner Abdul Kader Jaffer and I am getting to know him.

FLOODED OUT

The dominating events of recent weeks have, of course, been the flooding across the entire nation and the continuing crisis in the railways. Pendle largely escaped and people are not pointing an accusing finger at the Government. The same cannot be true of the railways and when I asked the Prime Minister on Wednesday if he would use the £300,000 dividend payment from Railtrack (arising from the Government's 0.2% stake in the company) to increase its equity stake, I was given a bald no. Public opinion is ahead of the Government on this one.

Gerald
Consett

OUT AND ABOUT

As always, I have been out and about in Pendle. In recent weeks I have visited Wardle Storeys, spoken to the school assembly at Barrowford County Primary School (and fielded questions!) and planted an oak sapling - my very own - in Victoria Park. Today I visited, with Azhar, the Ghusia School in Cross Street just round the corner from the office, before going on to a windswept farm in Trawden to talk about the problems facing agriculture.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
24.11.00.

10.30
Lancashire
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REPORT TO GC OCTOBER 2000

This has been a very busy week for me with Parliament back in session after the long Recess. On the first day back, we had the election of the new Speaker, Michael Martin, and it remains to be seen how he copes with the pressure. He got a lot of votes from my colleagues on the Labour side (fewer than a dozen Tories voted for him; the overwhelming majority abstained and about eight against, which is unprecedented) hinting that he would be a great moderniser but now it seems he is content not to "block" initiatives. I wanted a Speaker who would really move things along and would be proactive.

ORDER, ORDER

As you may know, I took it upon myself to organise a hustings for all the candidates and in the event, eight turned up. The new Speaker wasn't one of them. Had he turned up he would have been forced to give commitments and that wasn't the name of the game. Nevertheless, things will never be the same and to that extent the hustings was a very useful initiative which was appreciated by lots of MPs. It took a lot of effort to organise, with letters going out from Carr Road on a regular basis and Ruth and Helen deserve the Order of Lenin!

RAILTRACK

Leaving aside Westminster navel gazing, the event that gripped the nation's attention was the dreadful rail crash at Hatfield, the third major accident on the network in as many years. Who would have believed it possible when we had the mandating meeting for Conference and when we discussed corporate liability and whether the train protection system should be installed as a matter of course, that a month later there would be another catastrophe. Rail privatisation has proved to be a disaster. True, the standard of service on trains is generally a lot higher now than in BR days and we no longer have to put up with curly sandwiches. But in terms of safety, the new structures are wanting.

I met Gerald Corbett, the Chief Executive of Railtrack in July this year along with four or five other MPs with particular interest in transport issues. He told us of his concerns that Railtrack would not necessarily be able to generate itself the huge investment needed to get the railway network up to scratch. He asked us if we would put pressure on the Government to take an equity stake in Railtrack. The company had approached Ministers with such a proposition but, astonishingly, had been sent packing. It follows that all this stuff we hear about compensation being payable to take the railway back into public ownership is completely missing the point. Railtrack wants the Government to take a stake and we are saying no!

AIR FOR SALE

Last night the Lords voted against the part of the Transport Bill which allows for the sell-off of Air Traffic Control. The Government has said that when this comes back to the Commons it will be reversed and sent back to the Lords again. I shall not be supporting the Government on this. We need to remind ourselves that the privatisation of Air Traffic Control never featured in our Manifesto and was only slotted into the Transport Section of

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the National Policy Forum document after the initial consultation with members had been completed. This is an issue where the Government needs saving from itself.

If we privatise (and we most certainly do not need the money) and a plane fell out of the skies, we would never recover. If the Government is determined to change the present set-up the only acceptable option would be a non-profit trust or some such.

BSE

Yesterday in the Commons we had the report on BSE which I think was very gentle with Ministers in the previous Government. In a nutshell, Lord Phillips found that the system let the people down, with its obsessive, smothering secrecy. For my own part I do believe that Ministers believed they were doing the right thing, acting on advice and that they refused to believe the possible scale of the epidemic. We still don't know. If ever there was a case for a robust Freedom of Information Act, this is it.

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BSE has cost the UK £4 billion so far, with millions more in the pipeline. To its credit, the Government yesterday indicated that a trust fund would be set up so that those who fall victim to new variant CJD will be properly looked after.

needs
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increased

FUEL PROTEST

We had our first Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesday featuring the Euro and the fuel protest. And I thought the Prime Minister came out of it rather well. Hague has got himself in a difficult position with his support for the fuel protest and we wait to see what happens after the 60 day deadline runs out in early November. Industry has made contingency plans and the police have been reminded of the powers available to them and I am sure there will be a very robust response from them if protesters attempt to disrupt essential services. Some of the protesters are floating the possibility of blockading the 50 big warehouses supplying the four major supermarket chains in England. Others talk of disrupting the National Grid. Action of this sort would cause any public sympathy for the protesters to evaporate over night.

bringing
health
inspections

There is, of course, an issue about fuel prices where increases are literally driving people off the road and I am sure that this is something Gordon Brown will address in the pre Budget Statement next month. But the Tory policy of an across the board 3p cut in duty (costing the Exchequer over £1 billion) is just a gimmick. The hauliers want a 15p cut. Watch this space.

I seem to have been in and out of television and radio studios all this week and next Thursday I am in the audience in a Granada TV debate on fox hunting. As you know, we expect a Government Bill in the Queen's Speech on 6 December.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
 27.10.00

Dorothy -
 - speaker
 - Sir Peter Young - Boothroyd
 - Kenyon

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G.C. REPORT SEPTEMBER 2000

I am writing this on Friday afternoon on returning from my week at the seaside. The Conference has grown like Topsy since the mid-90s. And now that we are in Government, it seems that every lobbying organisation in the country follows us to the Conference.

Very few important decisions are made at Conference these days. Much of the detail work has been hived off to the National Policy Forum and to the various Policy Commissions. At Brighton this week the Conference was asked to endorse the eight reports from the National Policy Forum covering a wide spread of policy and there were only half a dozen or so votes on the alternative positions I outlined last Friday to the GC. I won't go into this in detail because I know that Julie will be presenting her own report.

Unfortunately, the alternative position on the Second Chamber was lost and we are now locked into a lunatic policy for the House of Lords where there will be so called people's Peers and others appointed because of their religion. Still, in politics nothing is forever and while I accept the Party's decision, I will still argue for a wholly elected Upper Chamber. The important report on the 21st century Party (which proposes important new rule changes - for example on the way in which prospective MEPs are selected by the Party) has been held over until after the Election and there was no vote on the document. The most dramatic part of the Conference Week was on Wednesday with the debate and vote on pensions policy. I was very happy with the result which called on the Government to maintain the real value of the basic State Pension by, for example, linking it to earnings or inflation. Gordon Brown has said that he would not allow Government policy to be dictated by the Trade Unions, but the Government will be under pressure to deliver and that is as it should be. The pensioners do not want any more gimmicks. If the Government wants to target the poorest pensioners, then, by hook or by crook, it must ensure that there is a take up of well over 90%, otherwise all the old arguments about means testing will resurface.

After the debate I bumped into a colleague from a very marginal seat who was lamenting that the Conference vote would cost him his seat. Not so! The Conferences have become so sanitised that a real debate on a real issue comes like a breath of fresh air. People outside are not stupid or ignorant, they know that choices have to be made. But they - an increasingly the media - want the arguments to be articulated.

Away from Brighton, Westminster is back in session but for the moment, only the House of Lords. The Lords have returned early to tackle the back-log of Bills which left the Commons before the summer recess. A total of eleven Bills are waiting to be considered by the Lords and some of these are very contentious. Yesterday, the Lords voted down the controversial Mode of Trial Bill which Jack Straw has brought in and which would restrict the right of defendants in certain circumstances to opt for a Jury Trial where the offence was triable "each way" - i.e. in the Crown Court with a Jury or the Magistrates, without.

Other Bills waiting for the Lords to consider include the Countryside Bill and the Sexual Offences (Amendments) Bill which equalises the age of consent at 16. This will face a hostile reception in the Lords. Other Bills facing a difficult passage include the Police (Northern Ireland Bill) which renames the RUC and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill which the Conservatives say will give disproportionate funding to pro-Euro Parties in the forthcoming referendum on the European Single Currency. Also in the firing line are the Freedom of Information Bill and the Transport Bill which includes proposals to privatise Air Traffic Control. At the moment, we do not know when the Queen's Speech will be, but the convention is that it is in November and there will be tremendous pressure on the Government to make concessions in the Lords to ensure that the Bills go through - even though heavily amended.

ORDER ORDER

As the whole world know Betty Boothroyd is calling it a day and I have taken it upon myself to organise a unique event - a hustings for the candidates. In the past Speakers have simply emerged through the mists and I figures it was about time that the candidates spelt out how they would do the job. This will get a lot of coverage - so watch this space.

OUT AND ABOUT

Last Friday I was over at Hutton for a meeting with Chief Constable Pauline Clare and the other top brass. And I spent a very useful afternoon discussing how the police service here was going to implement the Government's new initiatives. As part of the Crime Stoppers Initiative, Lancashire is going to get a few hundred new police officers over the next years. I am determined to see that Pendle gets its fair share and they are not all allocated to the so called crime "hot spots". There is also the question of delivering on the targets for ethnic minority officers following the McPherson recommendations following the Stephen Lawrence murder.

Tomorrow I shall be at the PPWA Annual Dinner.

TOWARDS THE GENERAL ELECTION

It seems to me that there is better than evens chance that the General Election will be called for next May. And we have got to be ready. The electorate in East Lancashire has a reputation for fickleness and we cannot let the case for re-electing a Labour Government go by default. We need to step up our activities and I shall be ensuring that regular newsletters go out to all Party Members, keeping everyone up to date. I shall also be doing a regular column with the Lancashire Evening Telegraph.

After a difficult first couple of years, the money is now coming through and we have a number of successes to point to. Every SRB bid since the Election has been successful and we have the recently announced Sure Start Initiative targeted on Brierfield and Whitefield. I shall be doing a leaflet spelling out in simple bullet points what Labour has done for Pendle and we need to campaign positively and enthusiastically on this.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.9.00

REPORT TO G.C. FRIDAY 4 AUGUST 2000

July was a very busy month indeed, with a whole raft of major policy announcements. We also had the publication of the Government's third Annual Report which had a patchy reception. My own view is that the compilation of the report should be handed over to some independent body, such as the National Audit Office or the Office of National Statistics and this would give the report greater credibility. That said, the headline statistics are worth repeating. The economy is still growing (although the nature of employment is changing) and inflation is low at 2.2%. The £28 billion deficit we inherited in 1997 had been turned into a £16 billion surplus by last year. One million new jobs have been created since May 1997. All in all, it is an encouraging snapshot of the Government's progress. Although, as we all concede, much more needs to be done. It is clear that the pensioners need a big increase in the basic State Pension and I am pretty confident we are going to hear more about this at the Party Conference in October.

While the Opposition snipe at the Government, it is pretty ineffectual stuff and Hague cuts a sorry figure now that he has been forced to tear up his "tax guarantee". He ordered all copies of the document be pulped, but I have my own copy at Carr Road! You will recall that the tax guarantee was a solemn pledge that tax under a Conservative government would fall year on year - regardless of the state of the economy. Senor Portillo has persuaded Hague that this is simply not a realistic thing to say. And while the Conservatives will go for tax cuts, these will be contingent upon the state of the economy. As it is, Hague has promised to match the Government's spending on Health, but not on any other policy area.

This brings me neatly to the Comprehensive Spending Review which will pump billions of pounds into front line public services over the next four years. There will be a 5.4% a year average real increase in funding for Education over the next 3 years and an astonishing 6.1% real annual increase in NHS spending over the next four years. There are real increases across all Departmental heads, including a 6.2% real increase in resources to tackle poverty in the developing world. The Government is in a position to do this because it has been successful in bringing down unemployment and related social security spending and because we have also slashed debt interest payments, we have freed up millions to spend on services.

Another major announcement concerned the future of the NHS and the Government's response to the Royal Commission on Long Term Care. The NHS National Plan provides for 7500 more consultants (up 30%); 1000 more medical training places each year to top up the 1000 already announced (up 48% since 1997) and 30,000 extra qualified nurses. As I say, over the next five years, the NHS will grow by over a third in real terms. This has never happened before. On long term care, the Government is to make nursing care free under the NHS to everyone in Care Homes who needs it. This is to be brought in by October 2001. The problem is in defining what is meant by nursing care. Is, for example, looking after someone with Alzheimer, nursing or personal care?

Plan
 - get out + good
 - getting school - nutrition
 - coming back
 - dentists 1/5

*removes defendants' ability to
 opt for jury trial in either way
 of cases. - dishonoury.*

*Decision: EU - 350k cost of steel
 anti dumping - towns claim
 cost of production*

There are over 30 Bills going through the legislative pipeline during the current Session and there have been suggestions that the Lords will attempt to talk a number of them out. The Mode of Trial Bill looks as if it may have problems and recent press reports suggest that the Countryside Bill may be thrown overboard, given that the Peers have tabled over 300 amendments to it. As I told the Guardian in a letter published this week, the length of each Parliamentary Session is determined by the Government and we should not be bound by the convention that the Queen's Speech always takes place in October or November. Let us call the Lords' bluff and continue the current Session for so long as it takes to get all our Bills on to the Statute Book.

When the Commons returns after the Recess, the first item of business will be to elect a Speaker to follow in the steps of Betty Boothroyd. I don't want the selection to be the result of a stitch-up, and on behalf of over 100 colleagues, I am organising a hustings. Watch this space. - Chris Norbury.

Now that we are into the Recess, I shall be busying myself visiting local businesses and so on. Later this month we have a Work Experience student and I am arranging an interesting week for him. We shall be visiting the East Lancashire Health Authority to speak to Kath Reade, the new Chair, and David Peat the Chief Executive. We shall also be going on air at the new local radio station 2BR. I have a meeting at the University of Central Lancashire and we shall be visiting some local firms.

Again, on local matters, we had the great news on Wednesday that the Pendle Partnership Round 6 SRB bid was successful. This is great news and is a real shot in the arm for the local area and comes on top of last year's successful bid. 4, 5 + 6 successful in each of the 3 yrs of post.

On Asylum Seekers, there is still work to be done to ensure that the Local Authority is kept informed and bang up to date with what is happening. I am speaking to Jack Straw about the situation locally. - Clarke issue.

Tomorrow, I shall be joining East Enders star, Dot Cotton, at the Barnoldswick Gala and next Sunday I shall be taking my life into my hands when I brave the Trawden Agricultural Show. The Pendle Forest & Craven Hunt is the Show's centre piece this year.

Finally, on a brighter note, I paid a birthday visit yesterday to Mrs. Elizabeth Landless who is 90 years old. She has been a Party members for as long as she can remember and she was Nelson's first woman Mayor way back in 1958. She still has an active interest in politics and thinks the present Government is OK. So there!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
 4.8.00

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 - Sydney Solomon*

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 27 Sept*

REPORT TO G.C. 30 JUNE 2000

REYNARD RULES OK

This has been a very busy month for me, dominated by the hunting with dogs issue. I have had a huge postbag from people from all over the country and they are, thank goodness, mostly supportive. I have had a few where the language is very violent indeed and I am still making up my mind as to whether I should read into the record the names of some of those who have threatened me with dire consequences should blood sports be banned! There will be an Adjournment Debate next Friday on the Burns Report and I hope to be called to speak.

NATIONAL POLICY FORUM

Next weekend is another important date in the calendar, when the National Policy Forum meets in Exeter to consider the six policy documents which will be going up to Conference this year. I think it is very important for the credibility of the Party and for the new policy making process for the procedures to be open, transparent and, above all, above board. Who needs the old fashioned stitch-ups? There are countless examples of policies being handed down from the top which I suspect have very little support amongst Party members. And the Government has got to start reflecting positions which the Party considers important. A case in point concerns the pensioners. It was obvious to the PLP many months ago that pensioners were feeling alienated and we had to do more than give them 75p a week. The Winter Fuel Allowance, the free eye tests and the free TV licences for the over 75s are all good in themselves, but what the pensioners want is a decent state pension. As you know, I have been pressing for a restoration of the link between pensions and earnings and this is something we can afford. In fact, the country is awash with cash and the National Insurance Fund - which pays the state pension - is in surplus to the tune of billions of pounds.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY!

We are all looking forward to the Comprehensive Spending Review which is due to be published next month. This will put extra money into our top priority areas. The task for the Government now will be to ensure that the cash is spent! Because we stuck to the Conservatives spending plans for the first two years of this Government, the rhetoric of all the extra billions has not matched the reality of development on the ground. But this will change. The economy is doing well and the Government will have a huge war chest for the next election, we have just got to ensure its spent on the right things.

JOB LOSSES

Not everything in the garden is rosy. There is massive restructuring going on within the economy and although one million more jobs have been created during the lifetime of the Government, the nature of the jobs is changing. Cost pressures arising from globalisation of production are putting pressure on some of our biggest firms to transfer production overseas and this is an issue we have really got to address. Here in Pendle, Rolls Royce is trying to lose 152 jobs at the two Barnoldswick plants and across the country wants to lose 2,000 people. I have been down to see the management and shop stewards at B'lick. And only a few days ago I met the Chief Executive of Rolls Royce in London. I am doing my best to find a way through this. Also in aerospace, BAe Systems announced 3800 job losses across the UK with 750 of them coming from the Warton and Salmesbury sites. Leaving it all to the market is not a credible strategy for the Government, there has to be another way.

NOW HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS

On a positive note, we have had a series of encouraging announcements from the Government. Last week, Alistair Darling told the Commons that the Government was going to do the right thing by vaccine damaged children. The lump sum payments are to go up from £40,000 to £100,000 for all new cases and those who did receive smaller lump sums in the past will be given top-up lump sums to bring them in line with new claimants. Vaccination of children has brought immense benefits and it is a terrible tragedy that a tiny number have dreadful adverse reactions and are damaged. It is absolutely right that the State should be very generous indeed to those who have suffered a severe mental or physical disablement as a result of being vaccinated against a specific disease.

MEDICAL MATTERS

Also on matters medical, I was very disappointed indeed to read of the leaked report from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommending that people with MS would no longer have access to Beta Interferon on the NHS. For the Government to say that those already on Beta Interferon would not be affected, merely compounds the injustice. As President of the local MS Society, I am fighting hard to ensure that these draft recommendations are never implemented.

MORE GOOD NEWS

Again on the positive side, we have had a splendid statement on the Post Office. The Government has undertaken to secure the future of our post office network with a review in 2006. But the clear intention is that no post office should close other than for unavoidable reasons. By this I mean a retirement for example, where the Post Office has found it quite impossible to get someone to take on the business. The post office network has been contracting for decades now, but there are huge new opportunities with the advent of internet shopping and such like where post offices can be used as pick-up and delivery points for all sorts of services and goods. Local postmasters and mistresses have clearly been unsettled by the rumours that the transfer of the payment of benefits by Automated Credit Transfer would sink their businesses. About 35% of their income comes from benefit payments and if people choose to have their benefits paid directly into their bank accounts then clearly we must help the local post offices make up their incomes in other ways. The Postal Services Bill currently before Parliament allows the Government greater flexibility to subsidise post offices which otherwise might struggle to survive.

PENDLE ISSUES

Other local items in the news include the controversy over mobile phone transmitter masts and, of course, the continuing saga of the A56 bypass. I see that the Liberal Democrat MEP, Chris Davies, has stepped into the argument by suggesting that the old railway track bed should be re-opened. I can't imagine our local Liberal Democrats inviting him over to any summer fetes! On a related subject, I see no sign of my Conservative opponent in the General Election. Rashid Skinner has become the invisible man. Does anyone know what he is up to?

For those of you who are wired up to the internet, you can visit me on www.gordonprenticemp.com. See you in cyberspace earthlings!

GORDON PRENTICE MP 30.6.00.

GC REPORT 26 MAY 2000

Things have been pretty busy at Westminster this month and I am hugely relieved that the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill has now finished its Committee Stage and goes to the floor of the Commons for Report in mid June. It is a good Bill and for the past two months on Tuesdays and Thursdays I have been working through its provisions, line by line, so that it covers all the main points. It brings in the right to roam and gives new powers to prevent footpaths being blocked by selfish landowners who want to keep the hoi polloi off "their" land.

OUTFOXING THE HUNTERS

The Countryside Bill is also open to amendment to ban hunting with dogs and I have (rather controversially) tabled a new clause which would have this effect. As of today, I have about 84 MPs supporting my amendment which the Government is currently resisting. Ministers say a fox hunting amendment would wreck the Countryside Bill and it would never get through the Lords. If that is the case, then it is up to the Government to come forward with an acceptable alternative, other than supporting a Private Member's Bill. Going down the Private Members route is fraught with difficulties and if such a bill were derailed yet again the consequences in terms of public perceptions would be truly unimaginable. I want the Government to bring in a multi-option Government Bill along the lines of the one presented in 1994 to reform the law on Sunday Trading. This is a solution which would satisfy everyone and I am keeping my fingers crossed the Government will move on this. I have been under huge pressure to leave the hunting issue well alone, but the longer we leave it the more our credibility gets eroded. The whole issue is being covered on Sunday in "On the Record" at 12 noon. I have a modest part!

SUPPORTING MANUFACTURING

Closer to home there are of course continuing concerns about manufacturing industry and the strength of the pound is a real issue. A strong pound makes our holidays cheaper, but our exports more expensive and I am pressing - along with Peter Pike and others - to get the Government to look seriously at what's happening to manufacturing. It's the conventional wisdom that "ownership" doesn't matter. But the recent experience of BMW and Rover and Ford's decision to stop vehicle assembly at Dagenham knocks that proposition for six. I am obviously relieved that jobs have been saved at Earby Light Engineering and it should have a bright future. I am also watching events closely at Rolls Royce where the workforce is being reduced at Barnoldswick despite bulging order books and huge profits. There is an issue here about work being sub-contracted overseas and I hope to meet the Rolls Royce management and unions shortly.

ASYLUM

Another issue that has hit the headlines locally concerns the Asylum Seekers. And press comment to date has been fairly restrained. Although I was disappointed with one piece in the Nelson Leader today. It is quite right that Asylum Seekers should be dispersed around the country and London and the South East have been bearing a disproportionate burden. That said, we have to make sure that all the local authorities know exactly what is going on and that private landlords are not able to enrich themselves as a consequence. I am in touch with Azhar, Stephen Barnes and others so we all know what's happening. So far, just over 1000 Asylum Seekers have been allocated to the entire North West Region. We have been allocated 80 and Burnley 88, so the numbers are, by any standards, tiny. The Government's aim is to process all asylum applications within two months, with a further two months allowed for the processing of any appeal. We are aiming for these targets to be met by the end of the year. In the meantime, the message must go out loud and clear that Asylum Seekers are fleeing persecution and deserve to have their cases dealt with speedily, fairly and sympathetically. The last thing we want is for people to exploit this issue for racist reasons.

Tony Greaves has been in touch with me about the issue and so far he has been playing it with a straight bat. As a new Member of Parliament (astonishing as this may seem) I told him that he now has a platform to make speeches in the House of Lords and to ask questions of Ministers. I shall chart his progress with interest.

"ORDER ORDER"

I visited Edge End School this morning to hand out certificates to the youngsters who participated in the Motorola Parliament Competition. Edge End came Third in the North of England Section, beating hundreds of other schools. And this was only their second attempt! I had been down to the school to "coach the kids" and I told them I was hugely proud of their achievement!

I would like to thank everyone for the work done in the Local Elections and to say well done.

My apologies for missing the GC tonight, but its Phillipa's birthday.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.5.2000

REPORT TO G.C. 31.3.00

It has been a very busy week for me, with the Countryside Bill going into Committee. It deals not only with the right to roam, but with rights of way and wildlife and conservation and I also hope to amend it to ban fox hunting. I am under tremendous pressure to leave that aspect well alone, but if the Bill is not amended in Committee, as sure as night follows day, there will be attempts to amend it when the Bill returns to the floor of the House of Commons at Report Stage. I will be in Committee on Tuesdays and Thursdays from now until 18 May, so it is very time consuming.

I have got another Private Members' Bill into the system - Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill which, to my utter astonishment, was given an unopposed Second Reading and now goes into Committee. There is now a 50/50 chance that in, due course, it will become the law of the land.

HIS LORDSHIP

The headline of the week must be the astonishing transformation of our woolly hatted Tony Greaves into the coroneted Lord Greaves of Colne! I have only ever bothered to go into the House of Lords on two occasions to witness the induction or swearing in of a new Peer, but no diary commitment will prevent me from being in the Lord's Gallery to view the noble Lord Greaves swathed in ermine and red robes, doffing his three cornered hat to the Lord Chancellor as he swears allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen, her heirs and successors. What is happening in the Lords has a serious side. The interim House we are creating (after having got rid of the hereditaries) is hardly better than its aristocratic predecessor. We are creating a Second Chamber of cronies and the Labour Party's proposals for a nominated Second Chamber are quite appalling. I shall continue to argue for a small directly elected upper house of no more than 100.

JONATHAN AITKEN - MY PART IN HIS DOWNFALL

Last week started with the interesting revelation by Jonathan Aitken in his autobiography that I was responsible for his downfall. The extract in the Sunday Times revealed that in his view, my Adjournment Debate in December 1997 finally persuaded the police to act. It is certainly the case that I had grown increasingly frustrated by the police inaction, given that the Aitken libel case against the Guardian had collapsed in June 1997 when it was clear that Aitken had lied under oath. I was absolutely determined that Aitken would not get off scott free, when hundreds of lesser mortals are jailed every year because they lie to the court. There must not be one law for the rich and powerful and another for the rest of us.

- Health
- Education

- NW group 64

Share by
- PVT - down
in under 2

Daresbury (Warrington)
Synchrotron
(x-ray study molecules)
→ Rutherford Appleton
Lab in Oxfordshire

BUDGET MATTERS

The big event of March was, of course, the Budget and it was certainly well received. The huge injection of new money into the NHS was a real shot in the arm. Our share here in East Lancashire is a staggering £23 million, bringing this coming year's budget (i.e. from April) up to £384 million or thereabouts. Gordon Brown also put more cash into Education, with extra cash for books and learning materials going straight to Headteachers. Primary schools will get between £3,000 - £5,000, secondary schools with under 1000 students will get £30,000 and with over 1000 pupils, £50,000. There has also been an increase in the Winter Fuel payment to £150 per year and more help for working families. Pensioners can look forward next April to an increase in their pension of between £2 - £3 per week. This year's increase, linked to inflation was 75p and this has been very difficult to sell on the doorstep. However, the Government is determined to target the poorest pensioners not claiming all their entitlement, to do this. The lower capital limit which determines eligibility for the Minimum Income Guarantee has been doubled from £3,000 to £6,000 and the upper limit goes up to £12,000.

6.5%
real
terms
increase

11 from
Academy
+
Welcome
To our

- pensioners shake pension
- survivors

DRUGS DEBATE

Elsewhere, we have had the important report from the Police Foundation on drugs law. As you know, I have been in favour of the medical use of Cannabis for many years and I welcome the opportunity to have an open and honest debate on the whole issue of drugs and this authoritative report provides an excellent backdrop.

Ripon

AROUND IN PENDLE

Today I visited the primary school at Rainhall Road in Barnoldswick, where a public consultation is to begin in the summer on its long term future. As usual, the debate turns around excess places which the LEA is obliged to shake out of the system. But no one likes to see education provision cut back and it can only really be justified where there are sound educational reasons for doing so.

A couple of weeks ago I visited the McMillan Nursery in Nelson and I was really impressed by the commitment of the nursery workers and the enthusiasm of the children - even though one of them - Oliver - rode his tricycle over my toe on purpose!

Earlier in the month I also had the opportunity to meet Chief Superintendent McPherson to talk about local crime issues.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
31.3.00.

waiting for Hs Green Paper - imminent.

- Empty houses
- Band A houses for council tax
- Houses before 1914

G.C.REPORT : JANUARY 2000

It has been an unusual week at Westminster. On Tuesday we debated the Disqualifications Bill (which allows members of the Irish Dail to be elected also as members of the UK Parliament) and continued throughout the night and into Wednesday beyond the 2.30pm start of business which meant that PMQs was lost. I think the Conservatives shot themselves in the foot because Hague had a golden opportunity to zero in on some of the difficulties that have been confronting the Government since the turn of the year. The hype over Labour's 1000 days would have been difficult to sustain against accusations of difficulties in the NHS, Trans Tec and Geoffrey Robinson's financial affairs, the Mike Tyson affair, Pinochet and so on.

The Government is going through a patch of choppy water but no government can expect plain sailing throughout its 5 year term. Despite the inevitable grumbles, people are broadly comfortable with the Government which is pragmatic to a fault.

UPRATING THE MINIMUM WAGE

I have been pressing for annual uprating of the National Minimum Wage and yesterday I raised the issue in the Commons with Industry Secretary Steve Byers. I want to see the NMW taken out of Party politics. It should be uprated every year in line with some agreed index. I told Stephen it had huge practical importance for places such as Pendle (where 8% of all adults in work got a pay rise last April and 30% of all part time women workers) as well as having enormous symbolic importance for the Party and indeed for the Government. Every other benefit under the sun is increased every year and the NMW - although not a benefit - cannot be allowed to wither on the vine.

LORDS' REFORM

Last week we saw the publication of the report of the Royal Commission on the reform of the House of Lords and what a dog's breakfast that was. I told the Gerald Kaufmann at this week's meeting of the PLP on Wednesday morning that the report was utterly fantastic (in the dictionary definition of the term) and its list of characters would not have been out of place in an episode of Gormanghast! There will be a small elected element to spice up the present cast of Life Peers who will stay on in membership of the Second Chamber until they pop their clogs. The Church of England Bishops will still be there, but there will be new representatives representing myriad religions - except, that is, Roman Catholics - where Canon Law prevents their clergy sitting in the Legislature. An appointments commission will have the responsibility of selecting individuals to sit in this Upper House for a term of 15 years with a possible extension to 30! And all this from a Party whose mantra is modernisation! I told the PLP that there is a real danger that we would be outflanked by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives who may settle for the simplicity of democratic election. If we are to have a Second Chamber at all my view is that it should be wholly elected and number about 100. It certainly should not be the bloated 500 strong monstrosity the Royal Commission has recommended.

LONDON NIGHTMAYOR

Outside the Commons, the focus of attention has turned to the London Mayoral contest. And, as Frank Dobson has conceded his chances of securing the nomination have been undermined if not torpedoed by the intervention of Millbank and the leadership. Surely, after this fiasco the lesson needs to be learned that the Party apparatus should remain studiously neutral in internal Party elections. Democratic centralism is not the way forward.

This brings me neatly to the latest round of consultation on the 6 policy documents which are to go up to Conference this autumn. I think we have until 31 March to put forward comments and it may well be that we should make time at the next GC or in March to consider some of the main issues. Tonight we have before us the issue of Electoral Reform and although we are discussing this after the deadline for receipt of comments, I am sure the CLP's views will still be logged.

CLOSER TO HOME

I was thrilled to bits to hear that we had got money for CCTV in Nelson and credit must go to the energetic way in which the Labour Group battled on this issue. It has wrong footed the Liberal Democrats who have come out of it very badly indeed. Over in Barnoldswick, West Craven High School received Technology College status and, again, this is good news. There is, of course, a wider argument about whether we should be creating all these specialist schools, but the Government is fixed on its course and we have to be in there bidding or else lose out. The consultation on the A56 villages by-pass gets under way next week and I shall be going along to one of the exhibitions next week to chat to people and to the officers. We have already had a detailed background briefing from Richard Toon at the teach-in the CLP organised in December and I think everyone found it useful.

The County Council By-election is on 2 March and we need to get out there and work our socks off to make sure that Colin gets elected with a good majority!

GORDON PRENTICE MP

28.1.2000

Report to GC: Friday 26 November 1999

A busy week. A million things happening. Today, Michael Portillo returns to Westminster as the new MP for Kensington and Chelsea and everyone's attention will focus on his relationship with William Hague. For all Portillo's protestations of loyalty he (Portillo) desperately wants Hague's job.

In my view, Hague has been doing quite well in the Commons in his weekly jousts with the PM - but the Archer saga has changed everything. Yesterday's headlines about Tory sleaze have returned with a vengeance. Archer, Ashcroft, Neil Hamilton - not to mention Jonathan Aitken are casting a long shadow over the Conservative Party's electoral prospects.

Queen's Speech

For our part (and leaving the saga of the London Mayor to one side) we continue governing the country! The Queen's Speech unveils 28 Bills. Next week, we kick off with the E Commerce Bill to promote electronic trading. The law will now recognise "electronic signatures". The Government has set itself a target of providing 25% of its services electronically over the next few years. (This includes things such as tax returns!!) Also next week, we have the second reading of the Representation of the People Bill which will allow pilots for innovations for electoral procedures in local government elections. There will be a rolling electoral register.

The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill will outlaw foreign donations to political parties, put a cap on election and referendum spending, require public disclosure of donations over £5,000 and establish an Electoral Commission. Just what we need after all the allegations of corrupt practices in local elections!

Local Government Bill

There will also be a big Local Government Bill which will allow for directly elected mayors - something I have the gravest reservations about. It will also give councils a wide ranging power of general competence to do what they consider to be best for their area. I have been arguing for this for years. Excellent.

We will also get a Freedom of Information Bill which is coming up for second reading the week after next. This will give people a statutory right of access to information held by a wide variety of bodies across the public sector and it will set up a new post of Information Commissioner. Critics say there are two major causes for concern. The most important of these, they say, permits all information relating to the formulation of Government policy, including factual information and analysis, to be kept confidential. Critics say factual information should be exempt. The second area of concern relates to the powers of the Information Commissioner. Critics say the Commissioner should

have powers to require disclosure on public interest grounds. In the Bill, the final decision is left with Ministers and authorities.

Other Bills include: Care Standards - setting up an independent regulation system for care and children's homes; a Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill which will replace the complex formula for child support liability with a simple system and establish the second state pension; a Countryside Bill guaranteeing the right to roam on open countryside.

We will also have a Bill to set up the new Learning and Skills Councils which will be responsible for planning and funding all post 16 education and training and a Transport Bill which will establish a new Strategic Rail Authority and give powers to local authorities to improve local bus services through partnerships. There will be powers to introduce congestion charging.

This week we have also had the Local Government Finance settlement which claims to be good for local government. As always I wait to see the small print - but there has been a 5.2% increase in Government grant to councils and an extra 7.8% for education. Total Government support for local authorities comes to £41.5 billion. A lot of cash. The police service in England and Wales got a 3% increase overall but in Lancashire we got a 3.9% - an increase of over £7m from last year.

We also had the publication of the school performance tables yesterday. But do they reflect the situation in our schools accurately? Is there a better way?

Gordon Prentice MP
26 November 1999

REPORT TO G.C. - OCTOBER 1999

First of all, I want to thank everyone for supporting my reselection as Labour's candidate for Parliament in the General Election - which may be only 18 months away. It really is a tremendous privilege to represent the Party in Parliament.

BACK TO WORK

Politics is back with a vengeance and we are now doing the mop up work on the Bills that were still in the Parliamentary pipeline before the summer recess. They must all now be agreed by both Houses of Parliament, otherwise they fall if they are not completed in their entirety before the new Session starts on 17 November. As we have seen on our televisions, the Lords have been a leaping and most of the hereditaries are now on their way out. Under the so called Weatherill compromise, some 92 hereditaries will remain in the interim House and they will be elected by their (hereditary) peers! I want to see a rapid transition to some elected second chamber and I wait with interest the recommendations of the Royal Commission which was set up by the Prime Minister earlier this year. It is expected to report round about Christmas. It is chaired by the former Conservative Chief Whip, Lord Wakeham. The signs are that the Conservatives in the Commons will support an elected element and it would be absolutely bizarre if we try to justify a wholly appointed House of Lords.

The Welfare Reform & Pensions Bill returns to the Commons on Tuesday and there are a number of elements in the Bill that have generated disquiet. These include means testing for Incapacity Benefit, restricting entitlement to IB and the abolition of Severe Disablement Allowance. I shall be attending a couple of meetings on Monday night (one with the Social Security Secretary) to see if the Government is minded to modify its position to take on board the concerns that have been expressed. We wait to see. We also have to finish the Greater London Authority Bill which sets up the new Body. As everyone will know, elections are due next May and while the Conservatives and Lib/Dems have chosen their candidates, ours is still uncertain. At least we now know who is in the race.

Looking forward to the Queen's Speech. I am, of course, keeping my fingers crossed there will be a Countryside Access Bill which will enshrine in legislation my proposals for a right to roam. It now seems pretty clear that the Government is not going to move on fox hunting, but we have had so many conflicting messages on this from the Prime Minister downwards, that it is difficult to ascertain precisely what is going to happen. But unless we get our act together soon, we will run out of time in this Parliament. And if we are not prepared to legislate with the enormous majority we have, then, I suspect, most people will conclude we will never do it.

Elsewhere in the Queen's Speech, we can expect legislation on Freedom of Information (which has generated its own controversy) and a new Transport Bill. Transport has proved to be a weak point for the Government and after the Paddington rail crash, we do need to do everything we can to reassure the travelling public. As I mentioned at the last GC, I am wholly and utterly opposed to the proposal to sell off Air Traffic Control and we are putting tremendous pressure on Ministers to ditch this policy, which only has a down side.

E. Pakistan Coup

When I spoke at the September GC, I touched on my recent visit to Pakistan. Hindsight is a great thing and I wish I could have said then that I saw the military coup coming - but I didn't. I recognised the tremendous amount of dissatisfaction with corruption and clientism in Pakistan amongst the so called political elite, but I was not prepared for this coup. Many of the people I met are now under house arrest.

Here at home, we are having our own problems with the France and the revelations about sewage fed animals simply takes my breath away - and my appetite! The people who grow and produce our food seem determined to turn us all into vegetarians. As I have said before, food has become a hot political potato and we have got to respond to the legitimate fears of consumers. On that point, I think the Government has misjudged the public mood on GM foods and I think we will have to tread very cautiously indeed. The most elegant and reassuring explanations in the world cannot disguise the fact that the bee will, inevitably, cross-pollinate crops with others.

CLOSER TO HOME

One of the issues of great concern at the moment is Objective 2 Status for some of the most deprived wards in Pendle, which will allow us access to European money. Azhar may want to say a few words about the circumstances which led to the omission from the proposed Objective 2 map of Whitefield and Bardley wards. I am doing my best to support the council's case and I am in touch with the DTI Secretary and other Ministers. I am also supporting the proposed Nelson West Neighbourhood Renewal Area and I have asked Nick Raynsford to follow in Hilary Armstrong's footsteps and visit us here in Pendle to see for himself the decrepit state of much of our housing. I have known Nick for many years and he has a long track record in housing and I hope he will be able to find time to come here.

early December
We now have details of the County Council's consultations on the A56 villages bypass and these are to be held in early February. I am keen for us to have our own local transport policy forum (if I can put it that way) to focus on this issue.

dentistry
I have also had to take a tremendous amount of flak arising from the decision of one of our local dentists - Paul Hadfield of Barnoldswick - to invite his patients to subscribe to dental insurance (Denplan) at about £14 per month, with the implicit threat that he may strike those unwilling to pay from his list. As everyone will recall, the Prime Minister announced at Bournemouth that within two years everyone will have access to an NHS dentist and I am hopeful that the forthcoming White Paper on NHS Dentistry will set out the mechanism for translating that pledge into action.

We have just received a consultation document "Financial Bonds for Visitors". This obviously is of great importance for many people in the constituency who have, in the past, had some difficulty in getting visitors into the country from Pakistan. If anyone is interested in sight of this document, then do get in touch with the office.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.10.99.

democracy
Pakistan Commonwealth
Chairman
one party state
Angus
Newly shaved
15% sales tax

REPORT TO GC - SEPTEMBER 1999

I am now back in harness in Pendle after my visit - with four other Parliamentary colleagues - to Pakistan, Azad Kashmir and India. It was my first time in that part of the world, but much of it felt strangely familiar. The purpose of the visit was to get a better understanding of the problem of Kashmir and to find out more about the internal political dynamics in India and Pakistan.

We met many of the movers and shakers in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir but our visit coincided with the Indian General Election (3rd in three years) and all the politicians were out campaigning in their constituencies. However, the Indian High Commissioner in London arranged meetings with the Foreign & Home Secretaries in New Delhi (these are the top civil servants - the equivalent of our Permanent Secretaries) and we had an extensive briefing from the British High Commissions in Delhi and Islamabad. The nuclear tests in both countries make for a menacing backdrop to the Kashmir issue and the fighting in Kargil took us very close to the brink. The Indians told us we would be welcome to visit Jammu and Kashmir after the elections and I will certainly be raising this with colleagues when we get back to Westminster. I very much want to get into Indian held Kashmir, hopefully next year. Unfortunately, the distance between India and Pakistan is as great as ever. The idea of India relinquishing Kashmir as part of the Indian union doesn't even register on their radar screens. Their "compromise" could possibly be the line of control being turned into an international border but this would be plainly unacceptable to the Kashmiris and to Pakistan. I think the way forward is by a series of small incremental steps mirroring perhaps the moves towards peace in Northern Ireland. As a start, the Indians need to allow people like me into Kashmir and there must also be access by independent organisations and human rights watchdogs such as Amnesty. I think they also need to allow an increased number of UN personnel on the Indian side of the line of control with free access to go where they please.

The issue of Kashmir has been ventilated at the UN this week with both the Pakistani and Indian Foreign Ministers being as uncompromising as ever. Many people we met pointed to East Timor suggesting that could be a precedent for a UN organised plebiscite in Kashmir. But the Indonesian Government gave the go ahead (obviously despite opposition from the Indonesian military) whereas there would seem to be no possibility whatsoever of the Indian Government agreeing to do the same thing. I also detected no currents of opinion within India arguing for a reassessment of India's policy on Kashmir and, without this, it is clearly more difficult to move things forward.

In any event, the visit was informative and very useful and we shall be seeking an Adjournment Debate when we return to Westminster. I have also written to Robin Cook to ask for a meeting to brief him on our impressions.

/cont...

London County School £250K deficit
1,000 other schools got more than 19,000 others
fair funding.
£19 billion into education — need specifics
(£30 per 15 per for second child)

-2-

Back to the real world! The Liberal Democrats have been having their Conference this week - with Paddy Ashdown bidding farewell and Charles Kennedy moving centre stage and cracking a few joke! I think Kennedy's election as the Lib/Dem's Leader is a real boost for us. While he can undoubtedly be witty, he doesn't get the adrenalin pumping and he has a reputation at Westminster for being "late and lazy". For me, the most important event of the week was Simon Hughes's astonishing attack on his new Leader over Kennedy's lack of direction. According to The Times on Wednesday Simon Hughes said Kennedy "still had questions to answer" about his leadership which was not "as clear" as that of Paddy Ashdown. Turning the knife, Hughes said that Kennedy had "never been a great policy promoter". With friends like that who needs enemies?

no fizz
passion
in speech

We also had the by-elections in Wigan and Hamilton and the results were a bit discouraging. However, we are in mid-term and there is always a problem in motivating people, but it reminds us that we can never afford to get complacent. The result in Scotland was poor, but voter fatigue was probably a factor.

OUT & ABOUT

NHS changes - PCare Trusts
- Mental Health Trusts

Here in Pendle I have been in discussion with David Peat of the East Lancashire Health Authority about proposals from the NHS Executive in the North West to "reconfigure" the Service. I do not believe in change for the sake of change, but it seems clear that some issues such as the growth of primary care trusts will have implications for the existing structure and some new thinking is required. There has, for example, been suggestions of merging Burnley Health Care Trust with Blackburn. The creation of new mental health trusts has been mooted. Even the Ambulance Service is being looked at and I was over in Garstang yesterday in a meeting with David Hill, the Lancashire Ambulance Trust Chief Executive. Earlier today I had a meeting at Nelson & Colne College to discuss a range of F.E. issues.

Caroline
D'Amico
Nervous
Lancs

FIT FOR PURPOSE

Next week, of course, I'm off to the seaside and I am looking forward to it immensely.

Finally, the Government has just published its first annual report on tackling poverty and social exclusion. This is a splendid initiative and its publication every year could be a real driver for change. The Government's immediate plans mean an increase in winter fuel payments to all pensioners to £100 this coming winter and up-rating the minimum income guarantee for pensioners by earnings rather than prices in April 2000. Welcome though this is, there is still, of course a demand for an increase in the basic state pension.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
24.9.99.

no specific figures... Just promises of
"reductions"

Mid term report

We are now mid way through this Parliament and it is time to take stock. It is worth saying at the outset that the Labour Government that was elected in 1997 has achieved a tremendous amount in only two years. We have already implemented a million and one things our Conservative predecessors would never have dreamed of doing. Under our belt we have solid achievements such as the National Minimum Wage which means such a lot to people in Pendle. From October, the new Working Families Tax Credit comes on stream. Voting Labour has made a difference to millions of people.

The Government has, however, misjudged one or two things and I have taken issue with it. I have never made any secret of the fact. Voting against your own Party is not an easy thing to do - as former leaders of the Party would testify. The late John Smith voted against the Party whip on the (then) Common Market. Neil Kinnock rebelled on numerous occasions when he was a backbencher. Michael Foot even lost the whip. In such mighty company, I am a pygmy indeed.

I say all this because, for the first time ever, the Party is circulating to CLPs a report on the voting record of Labour MPs. My own will be largely familiar. In December 1997, I resigned as PPS to the (then) Transport Minister so that I could vote against the Government on the issue of cuts in lone parents benefits. I still believe I was right in doing this. I was also at odds with the Government in September 1999 on two aspects of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism & Conspiracy) Bill which would have allowed charges to be brought in the UK against an organisation such as Friends of the Earth for, say, putting sand in the petrol of trucks used in logging the Brazilian rain forest and driving out the indigenous people. Not good!

I voted against the Government on a key aspect of the reform of the House of Lords - whether the second chamber should be elected or appointed. I believe all those in Parliament should be elected. The Government has yet to form a definitive view. More recently, I voted against a clause in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill which would penalise people who, in good faith, took out an occupational pension and then found themselves with a disability which allowed them to claim Incapacity Benefit. Under the proposed changes, they would lose Incapacity Benefit of 50p in the £ for every £1 of Occupational Pension they get over £50 per week. Not fair.

However these rebellions are the exceptions. Overall, my voting record is probably second to none in the North West. I vote in hundreds of divisions every year. On principle, I do not pair with Opposition MPs.

The Chief Whip's report to CLP secretaries comes with a covering letter from the Party's General Secretary, Margaret McDonagh, which states:

"It (the report) seeks to demonstrate how well your MP has honoured their undertaking to diligently attend the House of Commons and to support the Labour Government's legislative programme that puts into action the promises we made in our election manifesto." Were life so simple!

Nowhere did the manifesto say we would cut lone parent benefits. And on the last day before Parliament rose for the recess in July, we were told it was official Government policy to sell-off 51% of air traffic control. This privatisation never featured in the 1997 manifesto. On the contrary, I was at the Labour Conference where I heard Andrew Smith, then our transport spokesperson, say "Our air is not for sale!" Now, apparently, it is. We have yet to have the debate about whether we should or should not privatise. Who has decided this for us?

I know from my own experience that the PLP is a formidably self disciplined body which takes its responsibilities to the wider Party seriously. We all remember the 18 long years of Conservative Government and we know that splits and public disagreements are a sure fire recipe for losing elections. No-one wants to go back to those days - but there must be a place for dissent in a democratic Party.

In the recent Channel 4 programme (Blair's Way) which marked the second anniversary of the election victory, I was described as "a rare trouble making Labour MP". The Times' Parliamentary sketch writer, Matthew Parris, describes me as "the crisp, bitter lemon voiced Scottish left-winger". He dubbed me "stropky Labour".

The BBC profile says this: "He ousted John Lee in 92, for this Lancashire textile area with a history of witchcraft. In '97 he made it fairly safe... He is a fluent speaker, often rather sharp; a Republican who has questioned the value of the Civil list, and called for the Royal train to be scrapped. He is very polemical towards Conservatives. Hansard shows that he has one of the highest "hit-rates" of any MP, with numerous interventions in the Chamber. His most recent have been on fur farming, council tax, DERV, people injured by police cars, countryside access and Lords reform. He won considerable publicity in '99 with his private member's bill to give the public a right to roam. But the Government soon afterwards, to some surprise, said it would bring in its own bill."

That's what they say about me! But, for my part, what do I say about the Party and "the project"? "New Labour" is different from what has gone before. It is pragmatic and managerial - cast in the Prime Minister's own image. It explicitly eschews ideology. In the PM's own words "we do what works". But there must be more to politics than that. Politics is about choices - who gets what and why. And where there are choices, there must be debate and we must all engage in it.

Gordon Prentice MP 23/08/99

G.C. REPORT AUGUST 1999

With Parliament in recess I am now out and about in the constituency and doing things during the week which are impossible when I am in Westminster. For example, next Wednesday I shall be meeting the Kashmir Working Group at the Town Hall and I am very much looking forward to this as it will help inform my forthcoming visit to Kashmir, Pakistan and India. I shall be going with six Parliamentary colleagues and we all see it as a fact finding mission. Unfortunately, the Indian General Election (which is held on 5 separate days throughout September) clashes and Delhi is likely to be deserted so far as politicians are concerned.

NEARER HOME

I shall be in Brierfield next week for the switching on of the CCTV cameras and later on I shall be meeting the British Waterways people to discuss canal safety and related issues. Canals can be dangerous places as we all know. There was the recent tragic drowning of the toddler in Nelson. August has been quite busy in the office as we have had a work experience student helping out and she helped me plan and research a series of local visits to ELTEC, Burnley Hospital and such like.

On the broader political front, things have been relatively quiet. Tragically, my colleague Roger Stott - MP for Wigan - died after a long illness and I went over to Wigan for his funeral. The church was packed and he was obviously hugely respected in the town. The by-election has now been called for 23 September and while Labour has a big majority, there is never any room for complacency and I hope that we can pitch in and do our bit to help.

Here in Pendle controversy looms yet again with the news that the County Council is putting forward the A56 village bypass as one of four top priority schemes. Tim will want to speak on this, as he will have all the details.

AT THE SEASIDE

When we get into September we will all be thinking of the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth. Conference these days is, of course, a very different animal and we are all still wrestling with the new rules and new procedures. There will be debates on the second year and final Policy Reports on Welfare, Health and Crime & Justice and, as I write this, I am not sure that any alternative positions will be put to Conference - I suspect not. As the official Conference becomes more sanitised (with videos and balloons and such like) the real debate will inevitably move to the conference fringe and I suspect there will be much debate on issues such as the privatisation of Air Traffic Control and the Government's plans for the Post Office.

So far as the former is concerned, the Government revealed on the day Parliament rose for the recess in July that 51% of Air Traffic Control was to be sold off. This has infuriated the transport trade unions, the Transport Select Committee and those who work in the sector, who fear that privatisation will inevitably compromise safety. They recognise that money has to

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be spent to further modernise air traffic control (about £1 billion over 10 years) but they want Air Traffic Control to remain in the public sector, but with Government permission to borrow the money they need for investment on the money markets. The precedent has already been set in that local authority airports are able to do just that.

STAND AND DELIVER

plc - but with final holding all shares

So far as the Post Office is concerned, the letter monopoly is to be retained but only for letters and packages 50p and under. At the moment the monopoly applies to all mail costing £1 or less to send. The Post Office itself says that it will lose about £100 million profit every year as a result.

Inevitably, debate will also surface about where the New Labour project is heading. There have been articles in the press by Philip Gould (the author of *The Unfinished Revolution*) who is the Party's unpaid focus group guru. Derek Draper has also written in *the Observer* of the "ultimate endgame of the New Labour project, a goal that dares not speak its name - realignment". He went on to speculate that Paddy Ashdown might be brought into a Labour Cabinet as Defence Secretary now that George Robertson is going to NATO. This is fanciful! As much as the Prime Minister may wish to do this I think it is complete moonshine and that while the Prime Minister is personally committed to moving into an ever closer relationship with the Liberal Democrats, the reality of politics - both in the PLP and at local level - tells me its never likely to happen.

The other significant event that happened this month was the election of the new Liberal Democrat leader. I cannot imagine that Charles Kennedy is going to have a bigger electoral draw than Paddy Ashdown, but he will certainly endeavour to make a mark and give the Liberal Democrats a distinctive identity. I suspect he will probably try to do this by positioning the Liberal Democrats at Westminster to the left of Labour on a range of issues. The difficulty for him is that he must do this while keeping Conservative leaning Lib/Dem voters on board. Its the old Lib/Dem dilemma, trying to be all things to all people.

New Labour must not fall into that trap.

27.8.99

Gordon Prentice MP

*libs want
PR - Westminster
- L Govt*

REPORT TO G.C. 30 JULY 1999

We are at the mid-point of this Parliament and people are getting the measure of this Government. It is certainly a Labour Government in a different mould - it is explicitly non ideological and managerial and it is all about setting targets, measuring things and delivering on objectives. This is the context of the Government's Annual Report which was published a few days ago. It is a very useful check list of what we have done - and have still to do - in this Parliament and it doesn't deserve the ridicule that has been heaped on it. However, for this innovation to continue in the medium to long term it has to have credibility and I think in future it should be compiled by an independent and objective body such as the National Audit Office or (and this is perhaps more realistic) there should be a commentary by the NAO attached to it. For all that, the Annual Report shows that the Government has achieved a great deal in only two years in office. And the public is still giving us support. Eddisbury is a case in point. Who would have believed it possible that a true blue Cheshire seat with a 12,000+ majority in 1992 could return a Tory MP in mid-term and claim a majority of 1600 as a triumph.

This month has been unusually hectic with a whole series of major policy announcements and initiatives by the Government, culminating in the so called "night of the short knives" - the re-shuffle. The Prime Minister now has a full complement of Ministers of his own choosing and people he is comfortable with.

BUYING VOTES TO END

Jack Straw cheered us all up a few days ago when he announced that we would be introducing legislation on the funding of political parties. This is a long overdue measure and will finally end the ability of the Conservatives to outspend all other parties at election time by taking millions from shady foreigners - no questions asked. Only people registered to vote here will be allowed to donate money to political parties and all donations over £5000 at national level and £1000 at local level would have to be made public. There will be a cap on the amount that can be spent nationally and a new Electoral Commission is to be set up to guard against electoral malpractice and abuse.

Also on the positive side was the Prime Minister's commitment to legislate to ban fox hunting. My own view is that he was caught off-guard and probably found himself saying something he wished he hadn't. But the die is now cast and we wait to see whether a Bill is going to be introduced in November. This is one of those issues where a third way compromise is simply impossible and I personally would be against any attempt to square the circle by having regional or county referendums. That would be too bizarre for words.

We also had details of the new Consumer White Paper which is stuffed full of good things. Pubs will have to sell a full pint of beer and this will obviously go down well! We will also be tackling the menace of one day sales and this has resonance here in Pendle where we have had a number of rogues ripping people off over the years.

*Lets - PM doesn't know where he is going
nor where it will end.*

*1st
PLC*

-2-

One or two recent policy announcements have troubled me. The announcement on the Post Office was received by Labour MPs in the Commons less than rapturously. It is sold as a new form of organisation which will allow private investment but some of us are sceptical. The universal service obligation of the Post Office is to be maintained, but the monopoly is to be restricted to letters to 50p or less or weighing not more than 150gms. This will lose the Post Office about £100m a year.

My second concern is about the partial privatisation of Air Traffic Control. Why on earth are we doing this? We all remember the commitment that Andrew Smith made to Party Conference a few years ago when he proclaimed loudly "our air is not for sale". These are both big issues that we will be returning to in the new Session.

*Not in
manifesto.*

OUT AND ABOUT

Locally I have been out and about visiting aerospace companies. Last Friday I was at Westons in Foulridge which is by all accounts doing very well. Tomorrow I shall be going to the Hurel-Dubois Open Day. As everyone knows, I have been fairly outspoken on the redundancies announced by Rolls Royce and British Aerospace, despite the fact that the sector is booming and both the RR and BAe order books have never been fuller. This is the great paradox that new technology and new materials it is possible to manufacture things in a fraction of the time and with many fewer people than was the case before. The Eurofighter for example will be built in 18 months as opposed to the 36 months for the Tornado.

We have also had the White Paper on Post 16 Education "Learning to Succeed" which envisages new learning and skills councils which will take over the role of the TECs. I shall be meeting Mark Price and others from ELTEC in a fortnights time to discuss the implications.

I was thrilled to bits to get the good news about the successful Pendle Partnership SRB Round 5 Bid - "Opening Doors" which will put millions of pounds into some of the most deprived wards in Pendle. We were also successful in getting cash for the "Enterprising Rural Communities" which had been put together by the East Lancashire Partnership and which will provide new employment and opportunities in the rural parts of the constituency. On a related theme, people are obviously very concerned about protecting our countryside from unwelcome development and new groups are springing up all over the place to argue the case (quite properly) for the resources we need to make our urban areas attractive and nice places to live. In this context, I think the report published this month by Richard Rogers "Towards and Urban Renaissance" will be a very useful contribution to the debate.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
30.7.99

*Visit to India/Pakistan
in Sep
Mtg with Benazir Bhutto
Pak Peoples Party*

*Frank Eating Disorder Clinic.
Peter Hill - last Friday.*

Wish
don't miss kept 3/4th of pension
value
contributory
incapacity benefit reduction for over 50
one pension > 50m

Report to Pendle GC - 25 June 1999

new electoral system = new dynamic

These are busy days and much is happening as the fall out from the Euro elections is analysed and digested. Many good MEPs - including our own Mark Hendrick - went down to defeat. The new electoral system, of course, did not help but there may have been other factors at work. It was difficult to motivate the Party and the electorate in the absence of a clear and simple message. And the Tory campaign with its simple slogan "In Europe but not part of Europe" struck a chord with many people. "Save the pound" was another potent message which had an appeal to the Euro-sceptic vote. Nothing prepared me for the fact that the UKIP would push the Lib Dems into 4th place here in Pendle!

The Core Vote:

PLP 2 weeks ago
Queen's Speech
Foxbury R to Room
Broad Coalition

The PLP is to get a presentation next Wednesday from the Party's Millbank psephologist, Greg Cook, but the gist of the report has already been leaked to the Press today. We are told not to dismiss the result on the grounds that nothing very much can be read into it given the very low turnout. We are told that our promises to improve the public services (notably education and health) do not accord with the reality. There are also problems with the "core vote" and some Party members feel disengaged and alienated. I think we need to keep the Euro vote in perspective. There are lessons to be learned and no Party - and no Prime Minister - can walk on water for ever. We must give a clear message to our supporters and the voters. Mixed messages (talking right and acting left) sow confusion.

Daily Mail

Solid Achievements:

Labour has a solid record of achievement under its belt after only two years. The Minimum Wage; trade union rights to recognition; the New Deal; the Working Families Tax Credit (which is introduced in October) and a million other things the Tories would never have done. We have all the constitutional changes, the abolition of hereditary peers and the reform of the House of Lords; the Human Rights Act, a new Freedom of Information Bill (which, I am afraid, will have to be improved!) and much else besides. We all hope for success in Northern Ireland and if agreement can be reached in the talks going on as I write, then powers will be transferred to the new Northern Ireland Assembly next Thursday.

WJ Foods push forward

There are, however, clouds on the horizon. The whole GM foods issue has not been well handled and we have been painted as the friend of big business rather than the consumer. I certainly don't want to eat a tomato with a fish gene in it! The Leadership and the Party needs to stay in touch with public opinion. Other problem areas include the Euro; Proportional Representation for the Commons and, more generally, our relationship with the Liberal Democrats. My views are, I believe, well known!

Aerospace:

We have had some bad news on the manufacturing front with yesterday's announcement of 2,200 job losses in BAe and this will clearly hit the North West although not, I believe, the supplier chain. I have asked for an early debate on the restructuring of the aerospace industry given these developments and the earlier problems with Rolls Royce.

Next week will see the publication of the report of the Urban Taskforce and I await it with keen interest. I have been banging on about the blight caused by empty homes and it was a revelation today to read in the press that houses in the famous Coronation Street are sold at auction for as little as £200. In Coronation Street (in reality Reservoir Street in Salford) are virtually worthless. All but 10 in a street of 40 are boarded up by chipboard and corrugated iron. A few weeks ago I met the Association of East Lancashire Landlords and there was some blunt talking. I got the impression some landlords did not believe there was a problem.

Out and About

As usual I have been out and about in the constituency. I should have been discussing the problems facing the textile industry at Albert Hartleys in Barlick but my train was delayed when the one in front broke down! I visited Laneshawbridge Primary (which got a glowing OFSTED report) and last weekend I dropped into St Mary's CE Primary in Newchurch - one of the new Beacon Schools. We have also just had the publication of the "education red tape" league tables and Lancashire actually comes out rather well.

Gordon Prentice MP

Friday, 25 June 1999

Report to Pendle GC - 5 March 1999

This has been a very busy month at Westminster. Next week promises to be hectic with the Government's announcement on countryside access expected on Monday and the Budget following on Tuesday. (As it happens, I will be having lunch with Dr Malik and his family and Peter Pike on Budget Day before Dr Malik goes to the Palace to receive his MBE.)

Prentice is a Leninist! I am writing this at lunchtime today as the Commons is debating the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. Lancashire has the very dubious distinction of being home to 6 of the 13 remaining mink farms in the country. I shall be voting for the Bill. As I type this, I see the Tory MP, Alan Clark, on the TV monitor and I hear him describe me as a "downmarket Leninist" who wants to jail Tories opposed to my Right to Roam Bill!! By contrast, Tony Greaves describes me in the latest issue of LibDem News as someone he does not get on with "personally, politically or in any other way". That's a tremendous relief! As a saving grace, he is, though, supporting my Bill.

Lords Reform. For the past week we have been grappling with Lords Reform and we finish the Commons stages of the Bill on Monday. I am strongly in favour of a small, directly elected second chamber (perhaps as few as 100 members) and I am dead against a chamber of appointees (which is what, I am sure, the Party leadership wants). We could be seriously outflanked by the LibDems and (perhaps) the Conservatives if they go for an elected Lords and we don't. In my view, legitimacy for those who make the law comes only with election - not appointment or patronage.

The Euro. We have also had the publication of the Euro Changeover Plan which has caused tremendous agitation among the official opposition. I think it is a sensible step to take and in no way pre-empts the eventual decision. On the Budget, I suspect the Chancellor will wish to move more resources to the less well off. We have already seen the biggest real terms pay rise for nurses for 10 years - paid in full from April 1st. Newly-qualified nurses get 12 per cent rise - 70,000 nurses get 8.2 per cent - more than 2 out of 3 nurses will earn more than £20,000.

Child Benefit Up on 1 April. And don't forget, the Minimum Wage comes in on 1 April along with a raft of new measures such as the Child Benefit increases and fee eye tests for pensioners. These will make a difference to many people in Pendle and we need to sell them in the run up to the local elections.

Elsewhere, we still have work to do but we are making progress. The chair of the Governors at Salterforth Primary, for example, is down to see me tomorrow and he will be pressing for another classroom to ease overcrowding at the school. I hope we will be able to do something about that soon. At Salterforth, class sizes are small - but the accommodation doesn't allow them to be very much bigger than they are! It is worth remembering that under the Tories class sizes got bigger and bigger. They increased by record levels - over 40 per cent between 1992 and 1997. We inherited over 470,000 infant school pupils in classes of more than 30. By September next year there will be fewer than 200,000 children in infant classes over thirty. That means that over 270,000 infant pupils have benefited from our policy since May 1997. Over 1500 extra teachers have already been employed and 600 additional classrooms have been built.

Lawrence Inquiry. The other big news of the month was the publication (and bungling) of the report of the Lawrence Inquiry. The Government should have accepted some responsibility for the disclosure of the names and addresses of the people who helped the police. The Home Office had the report for 10 days - and I spotted it on the day the report was published but did nothing about it because I believed (wrongly) that the names must have been in the public domain already. On the issues themselves, the Government is responding by extending the Race Relations Act to the police and instituting targets for the recruitment, retention and promotion of ethnic minority police and staff.

Something for Nothing? On the legislative front, the Immigration and Asylum Bill is now going into Committee under a new procedure which allows it to take evidence from interested organisations. This is a splendid idea and one of the first examples of pre-legislative scrutiny. The Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill has also gone into Committee. I was very critical of the Government's spin on this important piece of legislation. Ministers described the Bill as signalling the end of the "something for nothing" society. To lump Jobseekers, people with disabilities and widows together under that description was very misjudged.

The Royal Commission on Long Term Care has also reported and this report ought to spark a big debate on how we look after the elderly. We all get old and I firmly believe the responsibility for looking after those too infirm to look after themselves should fall on the rest of us. The fact that many elderly people have to sell their homes to pay for their care is a disgrace. **GP 5/3/99**

Report to Pendle GC - Friday 29 January 1999

All in all, it has been a fascinating month at Westminster as the Government has picked itself up and dusted itself down after the Mandelson and Geoffrey Robinson resignations. These things happen and it is important we put them behind us. We have crucially important Euro elections in June and elections in Scotland and Wales. And, as if we didn't know it, we have our own elections here in Pendle. We must all put together. Voters do not like divided parties!

The Lib Dems are a moving target - devoid of principle. We say we would cut class sizes to 30, they would say 28! They are always trying to outflank us. The furore in today's Nelson Leader over the so-called "Pakistan trip" is entirely typical of the way they operate. We are now told by the Leader of the Council that it is not a civic visit! In which case, why was it apparently endorsed by Pendle council? And if it isn't a civic visit, why is the Mayor down to meet a whole host of civic dignitaries over there? Is he expected to do so in a private capacity? On issues like this, the Lib Dems should not play to the gallery.

Nationally, the Lib Dems are in a bit of a state. Paddy Ashdown has decided to quit the leadership giving six months notice! Differences in the approach of the eight (!) candidates so far declared will help us tremendously. Unlike the Liberals, we have a lot to shout about.

The Lords

On Monday and Tuesday of next week we shall be debating the House of Lords Bill to remove the right of 750 hereditary peers to sit in the second chamber. It will be an historic debate and I hope to catch the Speaker's eye. (As it happens, I was at Edge End School this afternoon offering advice to the school team participating in the Motorola Youth Parliament competition. They will be filmed debating the case for and against the Euro in the "mock Westminster" set at Granada Studios in Manchester.

We have also published the Employment Relations Bill (implementing the Fairness at Work proposals endlessly discussed by the TUC and CBI!) and the Draft Food Standards Agency Bill. We all remember the e coli outbreak in West Craven in December 1996 and all the other food scares.

More cash into Pendle pockets in April

On other fronts lots will be happening. In April we begin in earnest the £40 billion release of cash into schools and hospitals and our other priorities. In April the National Minimum Wage kicks in - benefiting no less than 30% of women in Pendle in part time work and 8% of those in full time work. Let us not minimise the impact this will make and

remember the Libs were against a national minimum wage. When pushed they said they could just about stomach a regional minimum.

Also in April, we shall be abolishing charges for eye tests for all pensioners. On 6 April, we are cutting employees' National Insurance contributions giving an extra £65 a year for 20 million people. On 12 April, Child Benefit goes up for the eldest child by £2.95 to £14.40, the largest rise ever, benefiting over 6 million people. On the same date, the new minimum income guarantee for pensioners comes in - £75 a week for single pensioners and £117 per week for pensioner couples. This will help 1.5 million pensioners.

More help for the low paid

We are also introducing the new Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and Disabled Person's Tax Credit (DPTC). As a result of the WFTC, more than one million low paid families will be on average £17 a week better off. From October, the WFTC will guarantee low paid families with a full time worker a minimum income of £190 a week with no tax to pay on incomes below £220. The DPTC will guarantee a minimum income £220 to the family of a disabled person moving from benefit to full-time work with no tax to pay on incomes below £274."

Both WFTC and DPTC contain a new element, the child care tax credit, to provide extra help with child care costs. It will provide 70 per cent of child care costs up to a maximum eligible spending of £100 a week for one child and £150 for two or more children. These changes will mean a real boost to the incomes of many families in Pendle.

Right to Roam

As you will probably know, I am also busy with my Right to Roam Bill which will be printed next week. It will be debated in the Commons on Friday 26 March and I am pretty confident it will go into Committee. I just hope the Prime Minister will stop being afraid of shadows! Landowners are rich, powerful people but (generally speaking) they don't vote Labour! We don't owe them anything and, after all, it's our land. Isn't it?

Gordon Prentice MP
Friday 29 January 1999

Report to Pendle GC 27 November 1998

I am writing this at 6.30pm this evening, Friday, after a very depressing meeting with the Lear Corporation management at the company's Colne plant. The loss of 300 manufacturing jobs will hit the town hard. But what upsets me is the mendacity and duplicity of this American multi-national who have been telling us for two years that they have no plans to leave Colne. In truth they were just deciding when to go rather than whether.

Lear has an aggressive acquisitions policy having taken over 200 "facilities" over the past few years. They acquire companies, swallow what they need and spit out the rest. That is how the company grows. The Lear news came on top of the astonishing statement from Rolls Royce chairman, Sir Ralph Robbins, that the company could pull out of the UK lock, stock and barrel if we here in Britain adopted many EU Labour laws. And this from a company that chose to do a joint venture with BMW of Germany a few years ago!

Earlier this week there was a lobby of textile workers at Westminster including Gary and the T&G's Peter Reid and others from Pendle mills. The unions and the employers have jointly agreed an action plan for textiles which has now gone to the DTI. Textile workers want the (famous) level playing field that would allow them to compete fairly with their European competitors.

We discussed the M&S problem (sourcing from Eastern Europe and elsewhere); just in time production methods and what we could do to capitalise on the tremendous success of London Fashion week in promoting good design.

Also last week, I took a deputation from Pendle to see Derek Fatchett to discuss the unresolved conflict in Kashmir. Derek was open and frank with us and we had a very worthwhile exchange of views.

The end of the Peers show

At Westminster, this week has been one to savour. The House of Lords is at last to be reformed to get rid of the hereditary peers. When the Queen came to that bit of her speech, I was one of the hooligans at the back who gave an unscripted and quite spontaneous whoop of delight. Off with their heads, I say!!

Elsewhere, the Queen's Speech flagged up a raft of new Bills on Welfare Reform (affecting Widow's Benefits and Disability Benefits - there are consultation papers out on these at the moment); the Disability Rights Commission; Fairness at Work; Local Government (getting rid of CCT and replacing it with best value and also getting rid of "crude and Universal" capping - replacing it with more sophisticated capping! (Question: will small councils like Pendle be exempt?))

No turn offs

There will be an Age of Consent and Abuse of Trust Bill (equalising the age of consent for gays and heterosexual people) and an Asylum and Immigration Bill (licensing immigration advisers - about time too!) We will be introducing the Working Families Tax Credit which will mean that no family with earnings of less than £220 per week will pay any income tax. There will be an NHS Bill setting up Primary Care Trusts and putting GPs in the driving seat. There will also be a Water Industry Bill outlawing disconnections. There is a lot there to get our teeth into - but a lot the Lords could try to wreck if they decide to go down fighting!

The Prime Minister has also decided that we must all cuddle up nice and close to the Liberal Democrats and smother them to death with kisses.

There are some things I am simply not prepared to do and that's one of them.

In haste.

Gordon Prentice MP

27 November 1998

BESIDE THE SEASIDE

Next week I shall be in Blackpool for the Labour Party Conference. As everyone knows, the Conference is being completely recast and I suspect will bear very little resemblance to what we are used to. There is a new policy making procedure which we are still getting to grips with and the extent to which the wider membership can influence the leadership on key policy choices has yet to be tested. We shall have a question and answer session with the Prime Minister and the Conference will divide into workshops to discuss the reports of the National Policy Forum. I am down for the ones dealing with Welfare Reform and Health. As always, the Conference is a shop window for the Party (no one wants to scare away the voters!) but it also has important decisions to make on some key constitutional questions. The NEC proposals on selections for the Westminster Parliament will be put before Conference and the GC will know that it is proposed to bring in a National Panel from which CLPs will select their candidates. There are other changes to.

A MATTER OF PROPORTION

Staying on this theme we saw the results earlier this week of the new method of selecting candidates for the European Parliament. The final ranking of candidates was decided by the Party last weekend and our own MEP, Mark Hendrick, is ranked sixth out of ten. We shall have to work very hard indeed to make sure that we win at least six seats. At last year's General Election Labour in the North West took 53.6% of the vote. And if this result were to replicate itself in the European Elections in 1999, we would win six out of the ten seats. However, if any of our vote seeps away, either to the Conservatives or to the Liberal Democrats, we could, under the new proportional voting system, be down to five seats. So we really do have to pull out all the stops.

Still on voting, the big event coming up is the report of the Roy Jenkins Commission on a new voting system for the House of Commons. We don't know which way the Party at large or the Prime Minister will jump on this one but if the proposal is to bring in the alternative vote plus, then I shall be against it. Under AV+ the number of MPs with direct constituency links would be reduced and there would be a pool of "top-up MPs" to make the composition of the House of Commons more proportional to the total number of votes cast across the country. However, these proportional voting systems dramatically increase the power and influence of the Party machines at the expense of the individual constituency parties and this is something we will all need to take a view on.

QUEEN'S SPEECH

Looking further ahead, we have the Queen's Speech in November although we cannot yet discern its shape. We know there will be legislation to abolish the hereditary element of the House of Lords - the Prime Minister has promised as much - but we do not know what the new House of Lords will look like. I am dead against a "House of patronage" although I do believe there is a continuing need for a small, revising Second Chamber subordinate to the Commons. It is likely that we will get one (or possibly two) Local Government Bills dealing

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with elected mayors, beacon councils and innovative ways of voting (say at weekends or using mobile polling stations or voting at supermarkets and so on). Azhar may want to say a word or two about this. Transport must have a claim for legislative time although there are hints that parts of the Transport White Paper are thought to be too radical and might alienate the car driving public. I am in favour of congestion charging and such like and I think on Transport there is a nettle that has to be grasped.

OUT AND ABOUT

As always, I have been spending my time in the Recess getting out and about and meeting people. Earlier today I saw the splendid video produced by young people from Waterside (the Mayor was there to - we follow each other around!). And this morning I was at West Craven High School. I have met the new Acting Head at Mansfield and over the next couple of weeks the school is certain to hit the headlines again. The report of the Special Ofsted Inspection will be published shortly and it is our task to help get the school back on an even keel and re-build its reputation which has been rather battered by recent events. Elsewhere, I have had meetings with the County Council to discuss transport issues; with the Lancashire NHS Ambulance Trust; with the Police at Preston and here in Pendle and I am also getting round local firms to take their economic temperature. The high pound and interest rates way above European levels are certainly matters of very great concern. I first raised this with the Chancellor in the Commons about 10 months ago and I am keeping my fingers crossed the worst is over. Over the coming period, the debate and discussion on the Euro is bound to get more fevered as the new currency launches next year across the EU but not here in the UK.

On a very positive note, the Aerospace Sector is doing very well indeed and I visited Farnborough earlier this month to show my face at the CLA Exhibition Stand and to chat with people from our local firms. The new Government has been very good to the industry, with major financial help going to Airbus - where British Aerospace has a big stake in making the wings - and Rolls Royce who are getting hundreds of millions to develop their super successful Trent engine.

One of my personal crusades is to get the Government to act to open up the countryside but I fear the Prime Minister will take some persuading. But, as I told a big Ramblers' Rally at Todmorden last Sunday in the presence of the Countryside Minister, Michael Meacher, access to open countryside is not an issue where you can split the difference. A few extra paths is simply not good enough, there has to be "area access" that people can use and enjoy without the fear of being set upon by aggressive and vituperative landowners. On this issue the Third Way is no way.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
25.9.98

Report to Pendle GC: Friday 29 May 1998

Bombs away. The news which eclipses everything else at the moment is the accelerating nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan. What we are witnessing is nuclear madness. Both countries are home to millions of impoverished people yet valuable resources are being squandered on this pointless nuclear machismo. 70% of the 120 million Pakistanis are illiterate.

I was speaking last night at a meeting organised by the Kashmir Welfare Association to welcome Colin as the new Mayor but, so far as I was concerned, the nuclear tests cast a terrible shadow over the whole affair. The more I hear of the chest thumping, the more worried I become. The Pakistan Foreign Minister says his country - with its dispersed rural population - could absorb a nuclear attack. He said explicitly that Indian cities are bigger and provide easier targets. What lunacy is this?

India's fanatical Hindu nationalist Government must take prime responsibility for starting this. Its nuclear tests rule out absolutely its possible membership of an enlarged UN security Council. As for Pakistan, there will inevitably be consequences for its economy which is one tenth the size of India's. Already, a state of emergency has been announced. I have told the press I am dismayed by it all. I have also said we must redouble our efforts to find a solution to the festering dispute in Kashmir before it ushers in Armageddon.

Cold Warriors. All this is coming at a time when tensions between the old cold warriors in Europe are easing. A couple of weeks ago I was in Bulgaria which sits in the south east corner of Europe. They are desperately anxious to join the European Union and Nato which they see as the route to their future prosperity. Certainly, these issues concerning EU enlargement have enormous implications for us all. The Euro has been launched (although the notes and coins will not be in circulation for a few years - but whether Britain is in or out, it will affect us).

Turning to more local issues, we had a low turnout in the local elections and we won two and lost two. We have new councillors in Waterside, Bradley and Southfield and the Liberals lost some ground in their strongholds. Overall the Labour vote held up although it was difficult to persuade people to go to the polls again. The Conservative vote, though modest in size, showed some signs of picking up - taking votes in West Craven for example off

the Liberals. Next year we will have the European elections and a new proportional voting system.

The Liberals are past masters at exploiting issues and fanning fears. Their predictions that homes for the elderly in Pendle were to close with old folks being turfed out onto the pavement have proved to be groundless although there are real concerns about home closures elsewhere in the county. Whiteacres in Burnley is recommended for closure with the County Social Services Committee on 9 June considering the matter. The Government has set up a Royal Commission into Long Term Care and it is due to report this December coming. There are big issues here.

The Unions. Elsewhere, we have seen the publication of the Fairness at Work White Paper. The trade union recognition threshold - which excited so much controversy - is set at 40%. I would have gone for a simple majority of those voting in a recognition ballot and I would have extended the law to cover small firms - those employing 20 or under are excluded. Nevertheless, I don't see the Government's proposals causing insuperable problems for the unions. If they have a majority of workers in membership then union recognition will be automatic. And even where unions aren't recognised, an individual trade unionist with a grievance can call in the trade union for help.

Low Pay. We have also had the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission pitching the minimum wage at £3.60p. This still has to be considered by the Government but is in, in my view, too low. Taxpayers subsidise scrooge employers through the tax system, family credit and the like. That said, because wages are so low in East Lancashire, even this modest minimum wage will make a huge difference to thousand of people. Still on employment matters, the new deal for the over 25s kicks in next month.

It is also the time of the year for work experience at Carr Road! Over the next month. I shall have two young people at the office, seeing how I spend my time and how I deal with things.

Next Friday I shall be joining ramblers at Huddersfield to mark the closing date of the consultation paper on access to the countryside, followed by a meeting with the local police in Colne. Then I shall be helping with the tea trolley at Cravenside Home for the Elderly in Barlick as part of the WRVS Volunteers week. In the evening I shall be speaking to the Keighley Labour Party about how New Labour decides its policy and the importance of agreeing "policy outcomes" or measures of success. **GP 29/5/98**

REPORT TO A.G.M. FEBRUARY 1998

COUNTRY LIFE

It has been a turbulent few weeks at Westminster with all eyes now fixed on the "Countryside March & Rally" in Hyde Park on Sunday. There is a constellation of interest groups attaching themselves to this Rally - some with a legitimate grievance and others with none. The great irony is that the Conservatives are championing the cause of "country folk" despite their appalling record over the last 18 years. Grain barons receive millions in public subsidies while hill farmers scratched out a living on less than £10,000. The privatisation of the buses robbed many villages of local services and village shops and post offices have declined dramatically. The Rural Development Commission in a report a fortnight ago painted a sorry picture of decline and it hasn't all happened since 1 May 1997. The Conservatives will be using one of their Supply Days at Westminster (Tuesday) to debate the Countryside and I hope to catch the Speaker's eye.

On Monday the DPM published a new consultation paper on planning which addresses the issue of where we build the new homes that are needed. Clearly, this has relevance to Pendle, where in Trawden and in Nelson there are campaigns to resist housing developments. My preference is to build on brownfield sites where at all possible, but the cost of reclaiming and redeveloping these can be astronomical. For example, no less than £100 million was spent cleaning up the Greenwich peninsular before work could even begin on the notorious Millennium Dome.

As I say, there is a whole compendium of issues gathered under the countryside banner which includes access to land (the consultation paper was published on Wednesday and comments are requested by early June. I hope Pendle Council responds); the consultation paper on drink driving (which may affect country pubs); the food issues (T-bone steaks, BSE, raw milk, salmonella, listeria and e-coli!); rural transport issues and affordable housing. This is not an exhaustive list and we could include the ecological disasters following the ripping out of miles of hedgerows and the dramatic reduction in many bird populations. It is certainly not the Labour Party that has been responsible for killing so much of the countryside.

CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Iraq is the other major issue which Parliament has been debating recently. This came before the Commons on 17 February and I supported the Government. I made my views known to George Robertson the Defence Secretary, as did many of my colleagues. We all agree that Saddam Hussain is a dangerous, warmongering psychopath, but it was never entirely clear what the strategic objective would be were we to go to war. Three of the five members of the Security Council were not prepared to sanction military action and it was always difficult to know when the bombing, once started, would stop. As sure as night follows day, Saddam Hussain would emerge blinking from his bunker to claim victory. The UN Resolution does not, of course, extend beyond the issue of UNSCOM Inspectors checking on Saddam's nasty biological arsenal. One of the continuing difficulties we have in enforcing UN resolutions is that these are enforced selectively around the globe.

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There are UN resolutions condemning the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, but the Indonesians are still there. There are resolutions about the Chinese occupation of Tibet, but the Chinese are still there. There are UN resolutions concerning Israel and, indeed, UN resolutions about Kashmir and we know what has happened there.

LONE PARENTS

Back home, we read the astonishing revelations in the Guardian that Lone Parents - whether in work or on benefit - will not lose money later this year as everyone had expected. The changes set out in the Social Security Bill which is currently in the House of Lords will go through, but the money Lone Parents would have lost will be made up in other ways, notably through a new system of tax credits, which will be unveiled in the Budget on 17 March.

Words fail me. No one who voted against the Government in the debate on Lone Parents on 10 December had any inkling that this was in the offing. A great deal of disillusionment, resentment and anger could have been averted had we known then what we know now.

HOUSING

Finally, we had a visit earlier this week from the Housing & Local Government Minister, Hilary Armstrong. She was given a presentation from the Council's Chief Executive on the particular problems facing us here in Pendle, followed by a short tour of Southfield and Whitefield before returning to the Town Hall for a second presentation from the other East Lancashire councils. Hilary took questions and was left in no doubt whatsoever that housing was and is a key priority for this area.

There is as very real and pressing practical problem concerning next year's housing investment programme and whether money from the Government's Capital Receipts Initiative can be used to support the main housing programme. I am in touch with other East Lancashire MPs about this (whose councils are all in the same boat) and I have written to Hilary following her visit. I hope we get a positive response.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
27.2.98.